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## The Economic Observer analyzed the cause and course of the work stoppage at Foxconn's Zhengzhou fact

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Sequel of Foxconn's inland movement: some workers' life too monotonous

"All you do is go to work, get off work, and sleep." But "compared to physical stress of work, she was more stressed by the possibility of conflicts with production workers everyday on the factory floor."

Editor's note: China Business Journal recently analyzed the work stoppage in a report after interviewing many workers at Foxconn's Zhengzhou factory and confirmed that 3,000 to 4,000 workers refused to work. This article by The Economic Observer looks into the underlying causes and detailed course of the work stoppage through the eyes of quality inspectors.

We translated the entire article. For more details, please have a look at this link.

<http://tech.sina.com.cn/it/2012-10-13/00217697628.shtml> 

Our translation of the China Business Journal's article can be found here: [China Business Journal confirmed that 3,000 to 4,000 workers refused to work at Foxconn Zhengzhou](#)

The Economic Observer (经济观察报) is an independent Chinese weekly newspaper that publishes news and commentary related to China's economic, political and social developments. The newspaper is considered by many to be one of the top three economic-focused newspapers in China and is well regarded for its in-depth special features and commentary. The newspaper has an official circulation of 600,000 copies a week.

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(Translated from Chinese)

A "work stoppage" of thousands of people during the National Day period has yet again attracted public attention to Foxconn's Zhengzhou factory. Two years ago, this giant supplier moved production lines making iPhone series products from Shenzhen to He'nan, one of the most important parts of the Foxconn's inland relocation strategy.

According to a October 6 news release of the labor organization "China Labor Watch, Foxconn Zhengzhou workers' overtime and quality control standards are too harsh, leading to a "strike" of 3,000 to 4,000 employees.

Foxconn later said in a statement that the so-called "4,000-worker strike" did not happen. What happened was that around 200 quality inspectors deliberately failed to show up at work as a form of protest against miscommunication between employees from different departments.

On October 9, our reporter visited Foxconn's Zhengzhou factory. There is more to the sequel of Foxconn's inland movement than this particular incident.

#### Life is too monotonous

Among the over 100,000 workers at Foxconn Zhengzhou, workers born after 1990 are becoming the majority. Li Rui ("Li") from Kaifeng, Yudong and Wang Jing ("Wang") from Shangqiu have been with Foxconn for only seven months, yet they are already "the old people" here. The former is 20 years old and the latter 19.

They are both quality inspectors at Foxconn who supervise the work on production lines. Wang describes their work as "walking back and forth along the production line everyday and checking whether or not the workers are meeting standards."

There are usually over 100 workers and two inspectors on one production line. When she joined the factory in March, Wang thought being a quality inspector was pretty good work. When she called her parents and explained to them what she did at the factory, she proudly said "Others work; I watch and just walk around the production line." Her family also thought the position was a good one: "supervising others work; that's great."

After a while, Wang realized that it was not as easy a job as she expected. Wang said that she was expecting 8 hours a day, two days off

a week, and have the weekends to go wherever she pleased.

But there is a big gap between reality and her expectations. "It is supposed to be 8 working hours a day. But in fact, there is 2-hours of overtime everyday. You have to get up at 6am. You can choose not to work overtime, but then you lose the full attendance bonus. The dormitory is further away from the factory compound than expected and you have to take the shuttle. Lunch break is merely an hour and you have to go right back to the workshop after lunch. If you eat slowly, you may be late. During the peak seasons, one can only get one day off per month." Wang Jing could go on and on with this list.

Before she joined Foxconn, she was not expecting any night shifts. Now she has to do night shifts every other month: one month of night shifts and one month of day shifts. Same as the day shifts, night shifts last 10 hours: from 8pm to 7am next day. "It is so, so tiring to take night shifts. Even if you don't have to do anything, you need to keep your eyes open. You just go wash your face when you are really sleepy," said Wang. At Foxconn, overtime and night shifts are very common. Not all workers resent overtime. One of Wang's colleagues worked 100 hours of overtime and received 4,600 RMB this month - the highest salary he had ever earned since he joined Foxconn.

For Wang, this kind of life is too dull and boring. "You have to get up before dawn and go home after dark. All you do is go to work, get off work, and sleep. You have to stand there for over 10 hours a day. You don't want to go anywhere after work other than hurry back and rest. It's too boring!" said Wang.

Even if the workers have some time off, there is not much to do around the factory compound. The place was a farmland before Foxconn built its factory there. Foxconn appears to just emerge from the ground. There is nothing but factories and dormitories.

Those makeshift houses on the street have become the major service providers for these tens of thousands of workers. A male worker eating at a sidewalk snack booth said that although Foxconn has been increasing wages, the increase in wages is no match for the rise in the cost of living around the factory. When he came to the factory a year ago, a so-called "Chinese hamburger" cost only 2 RMB; now it costs 4. The cost of stir-fried noodles rose from 4 to 8 RMB. If we include the cost of cigarettes, eating and smoking take up one third of the monthly wages.

Other than the quickly rising cost of living, workers are also concerned about the surrounding neighborhood. Fights and robberies frequently occur. Wang said that she was always nervous when she walked on the path without street lamps near the dormitory compound.

Compared to the provision of public services to workers, the local government pays more attention to expanding and then expanding again production. Foxconn is regarded as the major driver of the local economy. Even under the climate of depressed national exports, He'nan province's exports still nearly doubled with the help of Foxconn.

Under the impetus of gaining higher economic numbers, the needs of tens of thousands of workers are marginalized. Our reporter consulted with a staff member at the office of the Management Committee of the Zhengzhou Kong Gang Zone, where Foxconn is located. They have no clue as to who should be responsible for the provision of public service in this area. They are more willing to talk about factory construction.

### Violence under pressure

Wang said that compared to physical stress of work, she was more stressed by the possibility of conflicts with production workers everyday on the factory floor. She had to console herself by thinking that everything would be okay after work was finished.

As a quality inspector, her duties include the prevention of workers' operation errors on the production line and the reporting of such errors to the performance evaluation department. Although her reports will not have a direct effect on the workers on the production line, they will affect line leaders' performance, which is related to the line leaders' annual bonuses.

If operations errors are reported, line leaders' annual bonuses will be adversely affected. "Line leaders will blame supervisors under them and then the supervisors will blame the workers. Pressure is passed down from one level to the next," Wang said. However, she cannot do anything about it as an inspector. "If we have been inspecting for 10 hours without reporting a single incident, our leaders will consider us incompetent or think that we are not serious about work. We will be scolded, too," Wang said.

You're lucky if the workers you are dealing with are understanding. If not, some workers will not only start swearing at you, you also risk being hit. Some lower-level workers who are often scolded will even choose violence to release pressure. "Some young workers even dare to beat their own line leaders when they are upset about being scolded or line leaders speak harsh words," said Wang. The worst situation she has been in was when six or seven workers together assaulted her. Luckily they were stopped by others around her. Li's situation is slightly better: the worst she's suffered was when line workers verbally abused her until she burst into tears.

But there are those who fall apart under the pressure. At noon on the 9<sup>th</sup>, in Foxconn's Zhengzhou factory compound, a male worker over the age of 30 suddenly lied down on the ground after smoking a cigarette outside the production facility, shouting "I am Liu Luoguo, I am Liu Luoguo..." He then was taken away by an ambulance. One of the onlooking workers sighed: "Another one went crazy."

Wang is now very careful during inspection tours and tries to maintain a balance. If she tours one production line too much, the line leader is likely to think that you are picking on them. If she stops at one line for more than one minute, the line leader will come and ask what she wants. If you don't leave, the line leader will make you. "You are on an inspection tour, why do you always stay at our line?" Physical threats sometimes become the last resort.

Wang has been threatened once. It was almost time to get off work and a line worker, wishing to finish what was at hand and go home, skipped her inspection and was about to pack the product. When Wang tried to stop the worker, the workers boldly said, "With which eye of yours did you see me pack the box? Do you still want to be around here?" "They, of course, are not in charge of us since we are in

different departments. But they can beat us up after work. Some are just bluffing. But some real beat you even though they look friendly," said Wang. During the overtime of these days since the mid-autumn festival, several inspectors have been beaten. Some were beaten on their way home; some in the production facilities.

On October 2, a female supervisor from the quality control department was beaten in the production facility, leading to the "work stoppage" three days later. Wang and Li were both involved in the stoppage.

#### Foxconn's management dilemma

The day after the female supervisor from the quality department was beaten, Wang and Li heard about a work stoppage planned to be carried out three days later. But they were not sure whether or not it would really take place. They were also communicating with their friends from other workshops through cell phones and QQ.

The next day, Wang quickly got in touch with her friends in the inspection department. After confirming that other inspectors had stopped working, she returned to her dorm immediately. She thought that they need to stay united. Otherwise, those line workers will be more aggressive and the inspectors' demands for personal security will not attract the attention of the company's management.

After returning to her dorm, the leader of her inspection line called her several times. She turned her cell to vibrate. In the afternoon, she received a text message from the company, saying "the company will investigate and handle the security concerns you reported. The company will take measures to guarantee your safety at the company." The company also requested those workers who had stopped working to return to their positions before 4:30pm in the afternoon.

After contacting inspectors from other workshops, she learned that some inspectors had returned to work. She then answered the phone when her department leader called again in the afternoon. "Others have returned to work. I might as well answer the phone," said Wang.

As for this work stoppage, Wang said, "It was really fun." In her opinion, the company will offer better solutions for this beating incident. "In the past, they could just give someone an additional 2,000 RMB to settle the matter. This one might not go away so easily. After all, they owe us an explanation," said Wang. One of her inspector friends posted on the internet, saying "Today was like a dream that will later become a memory!"

Foxconn spokesperson Liu Kun expressed that this short work stoppage was primarily the result of a communication problem in which the needs of employees were not understood well enough. From the perspective of management, they have no need to be partial to any side. Liu said, "Perhaps our management personnel have not focused enough on how to prevent single incidents from becoming major problems.

Beijing University Sociology Professor Lu Hui, who has been paying attention to the question of new-generation migrant workers for a long time, thinks that Foxconn's relocation inland has reduced its expenditures, but Foxconn has not realized a fundamental problem: there hasn't been any change in the management system. The current semi-militaristic management style is not appropriate for young migrant workers. So as long as the fundamental issues with management systems, living environment, and work environment are not improved, the problems occurring now will appear frequently in the future.

(Wang Jing and Li Rui are aliases.)